17. A SUNDERBAN HERONRY

During my trip to the Sunderbans (Khulna) in early August 1944, arranged by courtesy of the Divisional Forest Officer and accompanied by Mr. M. Sain, artist and naturalist, I had a unique opportunity of visiting what is called 'Chunkuri Block', covering a huge area of typical Sunderban tree forest, which at this season provides an enormous nesting colony for heterogeneous groups of birds. Leaving Khulna town on August 2 after lunch, we halted the night in the *Aura Sipsah* and reached this spot next evening at 8.30 p.m., via Cobaduk and Buri-goalini forest-stations. At daybreak we got into jolly boats and wended our way through mazes of nullahs, shallow creeks and water channels underneath dense patches of forest trees. It did not take us long to reach the proximity of what was obviously a natural bird sanctuary but whose integrity and sanctity were maintained by the forest authorities. As we drew closer, we were struck by the grandeur of the scene—a vast stretch of evergreen swamp forest of Sunderban trees, some dwarfish, others taller and sometimes luxuriant, others again with tops bare of leaves, all entirely colonized by a huge mixed gathering of nesting birds. The species most noticeable were *Anastomus oscitans* (Bodd.), *Egretta intermedia* (Wagler), *Egretta garzetta* (Linn.), *Bubulcus ibis coromandus* (Bodd.), *Nycticorax nycticorax* (Linn.), *Phalacrocorax niger* (Vieill.) and *Anhiga melanogaster* Penn. Remarkably enough the Open-bill Storks (*A. oscitans*) and one or other of the three species of egrets mentioned above had their nests in the same tree, either 'Khalshi' (*Egiceras majus* Gaertn.) or 'Kankra' (*Bruguiera gymnorhiza* Lamk.), which is generally of low stature. Some taller trees like 'Keora' (*Sonneratia apetala* Ham.) and 'Baen' (*Avicennia officinalis* Linn.) apparently had great attraction for the Open-bill Storks. I observed the birds at close range picking and plucking leaves and stems from their tops, and in many instances I found their nests built in the forks of these trees and composed entirely of such plucked leaves and stems. There were egrets' nests also on these trees and I likewise observed some Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) nesting on them. One striking feature in the biology of these community-breeding birds was that while *A. oscitans* nested freely in the company of *Egretta intermedia, Egretta garzetta* and even *Bubulcus i. coromandus* it seemed to give a wide berth to *Anhinga melanogaster* and *Phalacrocorax niger* whose nests were placed apart, though not infrequently in proximity of egrets' nests. The one or two nests of *A. oscitans,* which was the normal number built on a single tree, were invariably surrounded by a large number of egrets' nests—either almost exclusively those of the Cattle Egret or by a mixed assemblage of those of the Little and Cattle Egrets and even *E. intermedia*. In a few cases I also saw nests of *Nycticorax nycticorax* in this assemblage. *Anhinga melanogster,* a prominent breeding species in this colony, was generally found to affect very tall 'Baen' trees. On one of these trees I saw a pair mating.

The number of birds in this breeding congregation was so enormous that no satisfactory estimate was possible. From our jolly boat passing through the narrow nullahs and water channels thickly overhung with foliage and hemmed in by dense tree forest it was not